



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Feature Story

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RICH REWARDS LIFT "DUCK STAMP" CONTEST FROM OBSCURITY TO MAJOR ART EVENT

Tension steadily mounted in the crowded Interior Department auditorium early last November. Judges' final votes in the 1983 Federal "Duck Stamp" contest were being tallied. And the stakes for the winner were high -- instant fame and perhaps as much as \$1 million. As Assistant Interior Secretary G. Ray Arnett stepped to the microphone, an expectant hush fell over the audience. "The winner," he announced, "is William Morris of Mobile, Alabama."

Morris' 5 X 7 inch watercolor design of a pair of American widgeons had been selected from 1,581 other entries to grace the milestone 1984-85 Federal Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp. Suddenly the obscure amateur painter from Alabama was known throughout the world of wildlife art.

Some 22,000 prints of the previous year's contest-winning entry by Phil Scholer had been snapped up by eager collectors. Print sales of Morris' widgeon design promised to be even larger. The reason--1984 marks the 50th anniversary of the Duck Stamp, the Federal Government's longest-running annual revenue stamp, which over the years has funded perhaps the nation's most successful waterfowl conservation program.

Legislation establishing the Federal Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp (long called the Duck Stamp) was passed by the Congress in March 1934, at a time when America's waterfowl were at a low ebb. During the previous half century, the wholesale loss of vital wetland habitat (mainly to agriculture) and indiscriminate shooting had decimated once-enormous flocks of ducks and geese. The situation had built to a crisis by the early 1930's as a drought of historic proportions seared the mid-continent.

Conservationists joined together to press for a continuous supply of funds that the Federal Government could use to acquire threatened waterfowl habitat for the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Duck Stamp was the answer. The 1934



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law required every waterfowl hunter 16 years of age or older to purchase one of the stamps annually. During the past 50 years, some \$285 million of these Duck Stamp dollars have helped to preserve around 3.5 million acres of precious wetlands habitat--a major factor in restoring the nation's waterfowl populations to health.

The Duck Stamp contest, the Federal Government's only sponsored art competition, first began in 1949. Previously, a leading wildlife artist had been commissioned yearly to design the stamp. Only eight artists entered the first contest. But as the popularity of wildlife art slowly grew, the market for Duck Stamp prints escalated--along with the financial payoff for contest winners.

The potentially rich rewards from soaring print sales drew national notice in the late 1970's. And the number of contest entries abruptly exploded from 300-odd in 1978 to nearly 1,400 in 1979. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which runs the annual Duck Stamp competition, was deluged. "The serious artists were there," recalls contest administrator Pete Anastasi, "but so were a lot of people just throwing stuff in for the fun of it."

Says Anastasi, "we had daffy ducks and goofy ducks. One entry showed a swan with a trumpet behind it--a 'trumpeter' swan. Another had a hunter sleeping in a blind with a duck sitting on his head. One fellow sent in an engraved plate ready for the Bureau of Engraving to slap on the presses. We've gotten embroidered work, entries on leather, slate, and even ivory."

After the flood of contestants swelled to nearly 2,100 in 1981, a \$20 entry fee was imposed--both to discourage frivolous submissions and to pay for the rising costs of staging the annual competition. "Most of the less-serious artists dropped out," notes Anastasi. Nevertheless, between 1,500 and 1,600 entries continue to pour in each year. However, Anastasi points out, "the quality of the art has gotten better and better. The ultimate profits are so lucrative that the contest is drawing the nation's top wildlife artists."

The competition has evolved over time, because of both occasional controversies and burgeoning public interest in the annual judging. Scoring by the judges, for example, is now computerized. Scoring totals for finalists (along with their entries) flash up on TV monitors scattered throughout the Interior Department auditorium.

Until the early 1970's, the drawings and paintings were pre-screened by a group of Fish and Wildlife Service experts and those that did not meet minimal standards for anatomical accuracy were culled out. But an accusation in 1975 that the contest was "rigged" suddenly changed the traditional procedure. Although no evidence to substantiate the charge was found, the Service decided to display every entry publicly from then on.

Some years ago a number of artists claimed that a colleague's winning design had been copied from a published illustration. The contest winner maintained that the similarity was a coincidence. Nevertheless, a rule was put in ordaining that no entry to the Duck Stamp contest may be based on a previously published photograph or painting.

As might be expected in a contest of such importance, the quality of the judging has come in for criticism from time to time. And some artists and dealers feel that the current five judge panel should be enlarged to seven judges--with the high and the low scores discarded. The idea is to avoid having an extreme score (either way) sway the final result. Fish and Wildlife Service officials are discussing such a change.

Regardless, the annual Duck Stamp contest has been enormously successful--both in stimulating public interest in waterfowl conservation and in inspiring some 26 states to launch their own conservation stamps to raise funds for wildlife programs. Meanwhile, many of the Federal Duck Stamp prints (especially some of the older ones) have soared in value. Several that sold originally for anywhere from \$25 to \$100 are now worth as much as \$5,000 to \$6,000.

Even the stamps themselves, which totaled more than 2 million in some years, have greatly appreciated. A full set (1934-1983) of used Duck Stamps is being offered by at least one dealer for \$1,350. The cost of a "mint" set is put at \$6,000! As a result, not only hunters but also collectors are purchasing Federal Duck Stamps nowadays. In addition, growing numbers of conservationists are buying the \$7.50 stamps (available at post offices, postal philatelic units and some national wildlife refuges) as a small but direct investment in the future of America's precious wetlands and waterfowl.

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Note: The colorful Duck Stamp may be purchased for \$7.50 at most Post Offices and many national wildlife refuges, or ordered by mail for \$8 (includes 50 cents postage and handling) from the U.S. Postal Service, Philatelic Sales Division, Washington, D.C. 20265-9997. The 50th anniversary (1984/85) stamp goes on sale July 2.

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